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Study fire coverage system

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People who run state and local government in New York should not be rushing, red light and siren, to judgment on the suggestion by Erie County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz to consider some consolidation among the 98 fire companies that serve the population of Buffalo and the surrounding communities.

In fact, Poloncarz hasn't really even called for any mergers, closings or other major redistribution of wealth among the many political entities concerned. All he has said is that, from his accountant's perspective, it seems that the amount of money spent to maintain all these fire departments, including the volunteer ones, grows at a rate rapid enough to be troubling when the number of fire calls keeps shrinking and, in many communities, the number of people who need protecting is declining.

Poloncarz raises a valid question. The knee-jerk reaction by County Executive Chris Collins, dismissing the Poloncarz report as a political stunt, is at least as politically motivated as, and much less helpful than, the comptroller's efforts. And rumblings that the New York Legislature might head off any reforms by monkeying with a new state law easing consolidation of local governments are troubling indeed.

Consider, as Poloncarz properly has, that Erie County taxpayers now shell out some \$130 million for all that fire protection, up more than 36 percent in the last 10 years. More than half of it is spent by the Buffalo Fire Department. But \$46.5 million goes to support the thicket of volunteer fire companies around the county, some in areas where the population is sparse, others in areas where, even though the population is shrinking, no one who remains is very far from a firehouse and the fire engine that lives there.

It may seem typically bureaucratic that the bottom line of the study Poloncarz released a couple of weeks ago is that there needs to be another study, and that Erie County should go after some available state money to do it. But it is also a correct conclusion that should be pursued.

After all, the state is right to offer what it calls its Local Government Efficiency grants, money to pay for the kind of expert studies that will help governments of all stripes find ways to offer the best public services possible for the least amount of taxpayer money feasible. Fewer local governments means less state aid, easing, at least a little

bit, the burden on the state's creaky budget.

And the state was also right to pass, earlier this year, the Government Reorganization and Citizen Empowerment Act. It's the law that makes it easier for local government agencies to consolidate, on their own initiative, that of the county government, or at the behest of the voters.

A move to exempt fire districts from the consolidation law is unwise. Fire districts—single-service entities that have proliferated across the landscape with little forethought— may yet prove to be the most logical use of the new powers of reform that the state has granted us.

In a time when volunteer firefighters are much harder to recruit, when every taxpayer dollar has multiple justified demands placed on it, when modern methods of construction and security mean fewer dangerous building fires, a serious look at how Erie County's fire protection duties should be divided is an ember that should be encouraged to glow.

Comments

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